

"OLD MAN WARNER"

BY DOROTHY CANFIELD

I MUST warn you at the outset that unless you or some of your folks came from Vermont it is hardly worth your while to read about Old Man Warner. You will not be able to see anything in his story except, as we say in Vermont, a "gape and swallow" about nothing. Well, I don't claim much dramatic action for the story of Old Man Warner, but I am setting it down on the chance that it may fall into the hands of some one brought up on Vermont stories, as I was. I know that for him there will be something in Old Man Warner's life, something of Vermont, something we feel and cannot express, as we feel the incommunicable aura of a personality.

The old man has been a weight on the collective mind of our town ever since I was a little girl, and that is a long time ago. He was an old man even then. Year after year as our Board of Selectmen planned the year's town budget they had this worry about Old Man Warner, and what to do with him. It was not that old Mr. Warner was a dangerous character, or anything but strictly honest and law-abiding. But he had his own way of bothering his fellow-citizens.

In his young days he had inherited a farm from his father, back up in Arnold Hollow, where at that time, about 1850, there was a cozy little settlement of five or six farms with big families. He settled there, cultivated the farm, married, and brought up a family of three sons. When the Civil War came, he volunteered together with his oldest boy and went off to fight in the second year of the war. He came back alone in 1864, the son having fallen in the Battle of the Wilderness. And he went back up to Arnold Hollow to live, and there he stayed, although the rest of his world broke up and rearranged itself in a different pattern, mostly centering about the new railway track in the main valley.

Only the older men returned to the Arnold Hollow settlement to go on cultivating their steep, rocky farms. The younger ones set off for the West, the two remaining Warner boys with the others. Their father and mother stayed,

the man hardly ever leaving the farm now even to go to town. His wife said once that he seemed to feel as though he never could get caught up on the years he had missed during the war. She said that he always had thought the world of his own home.

The boys did pretty well out in Iowa, had the usual ups and downs of pioneer farmers, and by 1898, when their mother died, leaving their father alone at seventy-one, they were men of forty-eight and forty-six who had comfortable homes to which to invite him to pass his old age.

Everybody in our town began to lay plans about what they would buy at the auction when Old Man Warner would sell off his things, as the other Arnold Hollow families had; for by this time, for one reason or another, the Warners were the only people left up there. Also the Selectmen planned to cut out the Arnold Hollow Road and put the tidy little sum saved from the upkeep of that into improvements on the main valley thoroughfare. But old Mr. Warner wrote his sons and told the Selectmen that he saw no reason for leaving his home to go and live in a strange place and be a burden to his children, with whom, having seen them at the rarest intervals during the last thirty years, he did not feel very well acquainted. And he always had liked his own home. Why should he leave it? It was pretty late in the day for him to get used to Western ways. He'd just be a bother to his boys. He didn't want to be a bother to anybody, and he didn't propose to be! There were a good many protests all round, but of course the Selectmen had not the faintest authority over him, and, as quite probably his sons were at heart relieved, nothing was done. The town very grudgingly voted the money to keep up the Arnold Hollow Road, but consoled itself by saying freely that the old cuss never had been so very bright, and was worse now; evidently had no idea what he was trying to do and would soon get tired of living alone and "doing for himself."

That was twenty-two years ago. Selectmen who were then vigorous and middle-aged of fifty-five, grew old, de-

crepit, died, and were buried. Boys who were learning their letters then grew up, married, had children, and became Selectmen in their turn. Old Man Warner's sons grew old and died, and the names of most of his grandchildren, scattered all over the West, were unknown to us. And still the old man lived alone in his home and "did for himself."

Every spring when road work began the Selectmen groaned over having to keep up the Arnold Hollow Road, and every autumn they tried their best to persuade the old man to come down to a settlement, where he could be taken care of. Our town is very poor; taxes are a heavy item in our calculations; it is just all we can do to keep our schools and roads going, and we grudge every penny we are forced to spend on tramps, paupers, or the indigent sick. Selectmen in whose régime town expenses were high are not only never re-elected to town office, but their name is a byword and a reproach for years afterwards. We elect them, among other things, to see to it that town expenses are not high, and to lay their plans accordingly.

Two decades of Selectmen, heavy with this responsibility, tried to lay their plans accordingly in regard to Old Man Warner, and ran their heads into a stone wall. One Board of Selectmen after another knew exactly what would happen: the old dumb-head would get a stroke of paralysis, or palsy, or softening of the brain, or something; and the town treasury would bleed at every pore for expensive medical service, maybe an operation at a hospital; and after that somebody paid to take care of him. If they could only ship him off to his family! One of the granddaughters, now a middle-aged woman, kept up a tenuous connection with the old man and answered, after long intervals, anxious communications from the Selectmen. Or if not that, if only they could get him down out of there in the winter, so that they would not be saddled with the perpetual worry about what was happening to him, with the perpetual need to break out the road and go up there to see that he was all right!

But Old Man Warner was still not bright enough to see any reason why he should lie down on his own folks or why he should not live in his own home. When gentle expostulations were tried, he always answered mildly that he guessed he'd rather go on living the way he was for a while longer; and when blustering was tried he straightened up, looked the blusterer in the eye, and said he guessed there wasn't no law in Vermont to turn a man off his own farm s' long he paid his debts, and he didn't owe any that he knew of.

That was the fact, too. He paid spot cash for what he bought in his semi-yearly trips to the village to "do trading," as our phrase goes. He bought very little—a couple of pairs of overalls a year, a bag apiece of sugar and coffee and rice and salt and flour, some raisins and pepper. And once or twice during the long period of his hermit life an overcoat and a new pair of trousers. What he brought down from his farm was more than enough to pay for such purchases, for he continued to cultivate his land, less and less of it of course each year, but still enough to feed his horse and cow and pig and hens, and to provide him with corn and potatoes and onions. He salted down and smoked a hog every fall and ate his hens when they got too old to lay.

And of course as long as he was actually economically independent the town, groaning with apprehension over the danger to its treasury though it was, could not lay a finger on the cranky old codger. And yet of course his economic independence couldn't last! From one day to the next something was bound to happen to him that would cost the town money.

Each year the Selectmen, planning the town expenditures with the concentrated prudence born of hard necessity, cast an uneasy mental glance up Arnold Hollow way, and scinged at the thought that perhaps this was the year when money would have to be taken away from the road or the school fund to pay for Old Man Warner's doctoring and nursing, and finally for his burial, because as the years went by even the tenuous granddaughter vanished—died, or moved, or something. Old Man Warner was now entirely alone in the world.

All during my childhood and youth he was a legendary figure of "sot" obstinacy and queeriness. We children used to be sent up once in a while to take our turn in seeing that the old man was all right. It was an expedition like no other. You turned off the frequented main road and, feeling very queer and all alone on the deserted side-lane, went up the steep, stony, winding mountain trail, dense with the shade of sugar maples and oaks. At the top, where your blown horse stopped to rest, you saw before you the grassy path leading across the little upland plateau where the Arnold Hollow settlement had been. The older people said that they could almost hear the faint echoes of whetting scythes and barking dogs

and cheerful voices, as there had been in the old days. But for a solitary child there was nothing but a breathlessly hushed, sunny glade of abandoned farm-homes, drooping and gray. You went past the creepy place as fast as your horse could gallop and clattered into the thicket of shivering white birches which grew close to the road like a screen, and then—there was no sensation in my childhood quite like the coming out into the ordered, inhabited, humanized little clearing in front of Old Man Warner's home. There were portly hens crooning around the close-cropped grass, and a pig grunting sociably from his pen at you, and shining milk-pans lying in the sun tilted against the white-birch sticks of the wood-pile, and Old Man Warner himself, infinitely aged and stooped, in his faded clean overalls, emerging from the barn door to peer at you out of his bright old eyes and to give you a hearty, "Well, you're quite a long ways from home, don't you know it? Git off your horse, can't ye? I've got a new calf in here." Or perhaps if it was a Sunday he sat in the sun on the front porch, with a clean shirt on, reading the weekly edition of the New York "Tribune." He drove two miles every Saturday afternoon, down to his R. F. D. mail box on the main road, to get this.

You heard so much talk about him down in the valley, so much fussing and stewing about his being so sot and so queer, that it always surprised you when you saw him to find he was just like anybody else. You saw his calf, and had a drink of milk in his clean, well-scrubbed kitchen, and played with the latest kitten, and then you said good-by for that time and got on your horse and went back through the birch thicket into the ghostly decay of the abandoned farms, back down the long, stony road to the valley, where everybody was so cross with the unreasonable old man for causing them so much worry. "How could he expect to go along like that, when other old folks so much younger than he give up and acted like other people, and settled down where you could take care of them! The house might burn down over his head, and he with it; or he might fall and break his hip and be there for days, yelling and fainting away till somebody happened to go; or a cow might get ugly and hook him, and nobody to send for help." All these frightening possibilities and many others had been repeatedly presented to the old man himself with the elaborations and detail which came from heart-felt alarm about him. But he continued to say mildly that he guessed he'd go on, living the way he was for a while yet. "A while!" He was ninety years old.

And then he was ninety-one, and then ninety-two, and we were surer and surer he would "come on the town" before each fiscal year was over. At the beginning of last winter our Selectmen went up in a body to try to bully or coax the shrunken, wizened old man, now only half his former size, to go

down to the valley. He remarked that he "guessed there wasn't no law in Vermont," and so forth, just as he had to their fathers. He was so old that he could no longer straighten up as he said it, for his back was helplessly bent with rheumatism, and for lack of teeth he whistled and clucked and lisped a good deal as he pronounced his formula. But his meaning was as clear as it had been thirty years ago. They came sulkily away without him, knowing that they would both be laughed at and blamed in the valley because the cursed old crab had got the best of them again.

Last February a couple of men, crossing over to a lumber job on Hemlock Mountain by way of the Arnold Hollow Road, saw no smoke coming out of the chimney, knocked at the door, and, getting no answer, opened it and stepped in. There lay Old Man Warner, dead on his kitchen floor in front of his well-blackened cook-stove. The tiny, crooked old body was fully dressed, even to a fur cap and mittens, and in one hand was his sharp, well-ground ax. One stove-lid was off, and a charred stick of wood lay half in and half out of the fire-box. Evidently the old man had stepped to the fire to put in a stick of wood before he went out to split some more, and had been stricken instantly, before he could move a step. His cold, white old face was composed and quiet, just as it had always been in life.

The two lumbermen fed the half-starved pig and hens and turned back to the valley with the news, driving the old man's cow and horse in front of them; and in a couple of hours we all knew that Old Man Warner had died, all alone, in his own kitchen.

Well, what do you think? We were as stirred up about it! We turned out and gave him one of the best funerals the town ever saw. And we put up a good marble tombstone that told all about how he had lived. We found we were proud of him—as proud as could be, the darned old bulldog who had stuck it out all alone in spite of us! We brag about his single-handed victory over old age and loneliness, and we keep talking about him to the children, just as we brag about our grandfather's victories in the Civil War and talk to the children about the doings of the Green Mountain Boys. Old Man Warner has become history. We take as much satisfaction in the old fellow's spunk as though he had been our own grandfather, and we spare our listeners no detail of his story—. . . and there he stuck year after year, with the whole town plaguing at him to quit. And he earned his own living, and chopped his own wood, and kept himself and the house just as decent; and never got queer and frowzy and half-cracked, but stayed just like anybody, as nice an old man as ever you saw—all alone, all stark alone, beholden to nobody, asking no odds of anybody. Yes, sir, and died with his boots on at ninety-three, on a kitchen floor you could have et off of, 'twas so clean."